

Context and Implications Document for:

Home language, school language and children's literacy attainments: a systematic review of evidence from low- and middle-income countries

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Author's Introduction

For many children the language of the home differs from the language of instruction in school. In this paper we examine the implications of such a disconnection in home-school language for literacy development along with considerations of the language and literacy environment in the home. The current literature on the topic is limited in two ways: first, it primarily focuses on the home environment prevalent in high income countries; second, a synthesis of the evidence drawn from quantitative and qualitative frameworks of research is missing. Our review addresses this gap by examining evidence from low- and middle-income countries (sometimes called 'the majority world') and presenting the converging evidence derived from multiple and mixed methodologies. Specifically, we investigate attributes of the home (the place of dwelling of the child) which lead to positive language and literacy outcomes in preschool and primary school-age children in low- and middle-income countries. We focus on three key attributes (books-at-home, home tutoring, and adult literacy practices) and synthesize descriptive, correlational, and causal evidence related to the disconnection between home-school languages. We build an evidence base that may be of interest to both researchers and interventionists who design programmes for school and community settings. For instance, the ethnographies show that interactions around print is generally low, but more so when family members are not fluent in the school language, and the intervention studies show that programmes that specifically target the connection between home and school language and provide parents the training and strategies to engage with literacy materials have the most success in supporting children's literacy attainments.

Implications for Policy

Contextualize mother tongue education policies: The assumption that all children who study in their home language have an advantage is flawed. The wider community and the home language and literacy environment (including the resources and capabilities of family members) also contribute to a home language advantage. Thus, policies that promote mother tongue instruction are unlikely to foster an advantage unless other issues are addressed; there is a need for mother tongue education policies to be sensitive to attributes of the home and multiple other contextual factors.

Empower families with limited proficiency in the school language: A considerable challenge for unschooled and low-literate parents is putting the desire to support their children's learning in action. A small body of evidence suggests that when interventions specifically target and support parental skills and proficiencies for home tutoring, and attempt to bridge the gap between the home language and school language, there is an increase in confidence about participating in the child's school work, to use the school language, to seek out solutions to support the child's learning and to use other available resources.

Value diverse research methodologies and the science of research synthesis: This review highlights that research insights from multiple methodologies are valuable in understanding the nuances of complex social issues. A rigorously executed synthesis of such diverse research has the potential to optimally inform educational policies, the planning and delivery of public services and for legislation.

Mandate for an inclusive child development research agenda: Given that the majority of the world population lives in low- and middle-income countries, the gap in the child development literature from these contexts is substantial. The body of research we have covered spans twenty six years and clearly points to the need for developing contextually-robust research (a) with context-appropriate and valid assessments of children's language and literacy skills and home environments and (b) that accounts for local geographies, multiple home and community attributes, and classroom and school-level factors.

Implications for Practice

Everyone needs support when the constraint is poverty and deprivation: Speaking the language of school at home does not guarantee better educational outcomes if the child is living in poverty and deprivation. Hence, to best serve students schools need to respond to the individual needs of children and their home support network. This would be more powerful than planning interventions around specific language sub-groups. Two suggested areas for building sensitivity to children's home life among teachers and heads of schools are:

- a) Raise awareness about risk factors: The risk for school failure increases if many disadvantages co-occur, such as not knowing the school language, not knowing anyone outside the home who knows the school language, belonging to a marginalized community, having no one to ask for help, having no money to buy books or pay for a home tutor or sponsor enrichment experiences such as visits to the museum or excursions to historical places of interest.
- b) Raise awareness that homes need support to accomplish what schools demand: For many parents, guidance is needed on what to tutor, how to do it and when to do it. Advice on home tutoring should be given in a collaborative manner and, when appropriate, a shortlist of preferred activities at home should be demonstrated and jointly practiced (such as book reading, talk about school-supplied topics).

The following is a checklist drawn from our review to build awareness among school heads and teachers about the parent population in a particular school or grade.

Know your parents

Most children have

- a near absence of the school language at home
- few role models of the school language at home
- skilled users of the school language at home

Most parents want the school to

- support and improve the home language (while also teaching the school language)
- go straight to the school language (and not spend time for the home language)

Hidden ways in which most parents support their children's learning include

- adjusting their talk at home to practice the school language
- striving to keep children in school even when preoccupied with subsistence
- finding someone who can tutor the child outside school
- finding ways to expose the child to knowledge-building activities

Engaging parents: Even when parents are not well versed in the language of the school or are low-literate/never schooled, they are motivated to support their child's learning. Teachers and other school personnel must acknowledge this interest and think of ways to provide appropriate guidance. In other words, parent-teacher meetings that merely update parents on children's progress or hand out a list of tasks for parents to supervise at home do not help engage parents—they may instead cause unease and leave parents feeling alienated or without confidence to undertake the remedial action that may be needed. There is a small body of intervention research that provides examples of ways to support parents who are not fluent in the school language and this is listed below.

Supportive schools

- focus on both the home language *and* school language
- introduce bilingual dictionaries
- send home worksheets with very simple instructions on how to use this
- encourage parents to borrow library books
- demonstrate how to read and/or tell stories at home
- demonstrate parenting skills around play activities
- demonstrate the simple components of a home tutoring session (introduction, main activity, conclusion)

Unhelpful school practices

- demanding that children speak exclusively in the school language at home.
- demanding home tutoring when family members are not fluent in the school language. demanding paid tutoring because this may not always improve children's performance.
- equating a 'good' home environment with the availability of a study desk and general stationary items such as rulers, calculators and computers. Simply owning these artefacts does not translate into improved children's learning.

Change occurs in many ways

The impact of guided activities with parents may not show immediately in children's performance. Our review shows that the changes may start in unexpected ways such as an increase in:

- parents' use of the school language
- parent and child's use of both the home language and school language during study activities at home
- parents being attentive towards children's school work

- parental confidence to monitor school work
- parental confidence to participate in school-related activities
- parents picking up materials to read when at home
- parents asking children about their reading habits
- parents praising reading behaviours at home
- parents seeking out others at home and in the neighbourhood to solve queries related to activities in the school language.

In summary, a well-planned support programme for parents can have far reaching consequences and help ensure an engaging yet relaxed interaction about school work between parents and the child.

A resource center that encourages engagement with books: When there are more books at home and when these books are used by members of the family, this is associated with children also engaging in more reading and better scores on grade level tests. In addition, the number of books at home, borrowing books from school libraries, and reading books at home (or outside school) are all associated with better school performance. Access to print resources for families with low incomes is, however, extremely limited. Schools can supply books to fill this gap. But the evidence is also clear that library membership by itself or having a large school library is not enough because these provisions do not automatically translate into book borrowing and book use. The main aim would be to reach *diverse* printed material to the home (not just school primers or textbooks) and encourage purposeful engagement with these materials.